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Sample Response Paper, “Turned”

In “Turned” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mrs. Marion Marroner demonstrates a high degree of mobility and power in abandoning her unfaithful husband and deciding to live under her maiden name (i.e. Wheeling). However, her departure from a failed marriage would not be possible if she did not come from a position of monetary and educational privilege, which provides her with the means to establish a home of her own. Equipped with both “a Ph.D.” and “some little money of her own,” Mrs. Marroner has the necessary tools to break from structures of domestic dependence and enter a public sphere that would otherwise be closed off to women (89, 96). Likewise, Gerta Petersen only escapes her “hopeless future” as an unwed and impoverished mother through both the material assistance of Mrs. Marroner and a process of education that transforms her into a sexually and intellectually enlightened individual (88). I argue that “Turned” effectively establishes a model for early twentieth century feminism in which education and friendship across social classes provide women with the tools to become self-sufficient.

Over the course of the story, Gilman clearly establishes that uneducated women are subject to systems of economic and sexual subjugation from which they may be unable to escape. Gerta Petersen is the primary example of this kind of victimized woman, as the narrator repeatedly describes her as “ignorant and childish” and often compares her to an innocent baby, despite the fact that she is “a girl of eighteen” (88). Although, Mrs. Marroner at first dismisses the girl from her service upon discovering her involvement with Mr. Marroner, the issue here is that Gerta comes from a servile class and has no alternative but to follow patterns of “docility and habit of obedience” (92). Gerta is effectively blameless because she operates within a system in which she has no choice but to submit to “where respect was due”, in this case, obeying the sexual demands of her male employer (93). It seems that, for Gilman, responsibility for women’s well-being falls into the hands of those educated, upper-class individuals who had a voice in early twentieth-century society.

While Mr. Marroner abuses his status in order to tarnish Gerta’s sexual reputation, Mrs. Marroner illustrates how a bond between upper and lower class women can lead to an alternative form of domestic happiness beyond marriage. In leaving behind her husband and choosing to live with Gerta and her child, Mrs. Marroner establishes a new model of domesticity in which “womanhood” and “motherhood” exist without the presence of male authority (94). She combines the roles of both mother and father, as she not only becomes a kind of adoptive parent for Gerta but also is the primary breadwinner for this new family, working as a teacher and renting out rooms in her home (96). Furthermore, this female-centered home enables Gerta to evolve from a state of childishness, as she appears at the end of the story “with a new intelligence in her face” (97). The fact that Gerta appears “like a tall Madonna” further establishes her elevation from a low social position into a kind of holiness, which would only be possible with Mrs. Marroner’s friendship (96). Ultimately, “Turned” suggests that women can break out of patterns of social and sexual dependence through the process of education, assisted by those women who already have some degree of monetary and intellectual mobility.

**Some Notes on My Structure**

I used a 3 paragraph structure

Paragraph 1: I introduce my specific focus for the paper and clearly establish my central argument about the text (that Gilman establishes a model of feminism in which education is central)

Paragraph 2: I expand on my argument – Gerta’s role as the downtrodden, uneducated woman

Paragraph 3: I continue to expand my argument and provide a brief conclusion – female-centered domesticity and Gerta’s evolution to a position of knowledge. I end my paper by revisiting my central claim about Gilman’s model of feminism.

Note that my argument in this paper is not a definite answer – someone could disagree with me. Also, note that I’m only talking about 1 aspect of the day’s reading. You don’t have to try to cover everything in the reading (and you won’t have space to do this). Focus on what interests you.

Remember that you should also pose **one open-ended question** to the class website on the day that you post your papers. Your question can relate to the topic of your response paper, but it does not have to.

**My question:** While “Turned” concludes with an idealistic image of female empowerment, to what extent is Gilman’s vision of female community possible in the early twentieth century? On a related note, what happens to women who don’t have friends in high places? For example, what would have happened to Gerta if Mrs. Marroner had not stepped in to assist her?